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Information dates

Anyone with an amateur interest in history likes to think about Important Dates. Writers of serious information history (Black 2006, Weller 2008, Warner 1999) would no doubt rebuke us for such a dilettante approach, but it holds an undoubted appeal.

In a previous *JDoc* editorial (Bawden 2009), I argued for 1759 as a particularly significant year for documentation, particularly from a British perspective. It marked the foundation of the British Museum, one of the world's major collections of documented artefacts, with a library which grew into what was arguably the first national library in the modern sense, as well as birthplace of the recognisable cataloguing code. That year also saw the beginning of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in south-west London, a pioneer in documented botanic collections, with the associated botanical taxonomies.

Rather more ambitiously, an article in *Intelligent Life* magazine for summer 2009 tried to decide which was The Most Important Year Ever (Marr 2009). The feature writer argued for 1776, with the American Declaration of Independence, or 1945, with its world changing events; he was duly rebuked for US-centrism by website commentators. His five guest writers chose arguably more interesting dates:

- 5BC as the likely date of birth of Jesus Christ
- 1204 for the Crusader sack of Constantinople, and division of the Eastern and Western Christian world, and origins of Muslim power in the Middle East
- 1439 for the introduction of the printing press to Europe
- 1791 for the origin of the telegraph
- 1944 as an alternative to 1945 for the new political structure, and also for the writing of seminal texts on what would later be seen as post-modernism and as Thatcherite / Reaganite politics

Web commentators have added some dates of ancient battles, some significant dates associated with the Mongol empire, 1492 (a bit US-centric again, though commentators pointed out that it marked the expulsion of the Jews from Spain as well as Columbus' voyage to America), 1919 for the Treaty of Versailles, 1940 for the Battle of Britain; and, interestingly, 1958 for the origin of the integrated circuit and the basis of modern computers.

If we discount 'political' and 'military' dates, whose importance seems to vary dramatically according to your national original and political views, and 'religious' dates, important (presumably) only if you are an adherent of the religion in question ... then we seem to be left with printing, the telegraph, and the integrated circuit. 'Information dates' seem to have a stronger hold over the imagination than the dates of medical advances, developments in transportation or agriculture, and so on. Reality or perception, I wonder? Is information really such a formative influence? And will the same answers be given in fifty years?

David Bawden

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